



COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

"Parks Make Life Better!"

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**PARKS AFTER DARK SHOWN TO DRAMATICALLY REDUCE CRIME,
IMPROVE WELLNESS IN L.A. COUNTY'S MOST VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES**

In a dramatic affirmation of a partnership built around the transformative power of parks and recreation, a newly-issued report details how the innovative Parks After Dark (PAD) program makes communities safer and has been extraordinarily effective in encouraging more active lifestyles.

Entitled "Parks After Dark: Preventing Violence While Promoting Healthy, Active Living," the report published by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health highlights how the summertime program, which completed its fifth session in August, has increased participation in physical activity, improved access to services, promoted community building and decreased violence.

PAD is coordinated by the Department of Parks and Recreation in collaboration with the Department of Public Health, the Sheriff's Department, and many other county and community partners, with support from the Board of Supervisors and the Chief Executive Office. In 2014, the award-winning program took place June 12-Aug. 16, on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings from 6 p.m.-10 p.m. As part of the programming at six carefully-selected parks, residents of all ages are provided with free activities that include organized sports, concerts and movies, classes on cooking and filmmaking, public health outreach, and health and social service resource fairs.

With communities throughout Los Angeles County disproportionately affected by obesity and violence, the report shows how PAD provides a model of how parks and public health staff, and law enforcement can collaborate to improve health and well-being in the County's most disadvantaged communities. Among its key findings:

- Serious and violent crimes in the communities surrounding the original three parks declined 32% during the summer months between 2009 (the summer before program start) and 2013. At the same time, serious and violent crimes increased 18% in nearby communities with parks that did not have the PAD program.
- Surveys conducted each year show that 97% or more of participants felt safe attending PAD.

- There were more than 187,000 visits to the six PAD parks during the summer months between 2010 and 2013.
- More than 16,000 community residents participated in physical activities during PAD in 2013, including many people who indicate they have a sedentary lifestyle.

“Parks play such a vital role in our communities — as places where people can not only enjoy healthy recreation, but also find safe harbor,” said Russ Guiney, Director of the Department of Parks and Recreation. “PAD is an amazing opportunity for the communities surrounding those parks to take full advantage of resources available to them. It also demonstrates to the people we serve that, while PAD is a summertime program, these facilities and open spaces are available for their enjoyment and enrichment all year long.”

Indeed, a central component of PAD is providing a secure gathering place in communities where, historically, gang activity and other challenges often discourage individuals and families from taking advantage of the wide range of health and social benefits available through parks and recreational opportunities.

“A safe environment is often a major barrier for L.A. County residents to get the daily recommended level of physical activity which is critical for reducing obesity and preventing chronic disease,” said Dr. Paul Simon, MD, MPH, Director, Division of Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention with the Department of Public Health. “Parks After Dark demonstrates that parks are important public health partners, providing opportunities not just for safe physical activity but for building positive relationships among community members, and connecting them with much needed health and social services. Parks After Dark helps build resilient communities.”

One of the most visible participants in PAD is the Sheriff’s Department Parks Bureau, which assigns deputies to attend all PAD events in order to maintain safety and strengthen ties between the community and local law enforcement. Capt. Holly Perez, Commander of the Parks Bureau, says PAD offers “alternatives that decrease the possibility of participation in at-risk behavior.” She noted that because of PAD, deputies were able to organize a basketball game with local youth that helped build camaraderie through friendly competition.

“This positive interaction between the local youth and my personnel has led to a trust and understanding that would not have happened without that PAD connection,” said Perez.

“Parks After Dark: Preventing Violence While Promoting Healthy, Active Living” can be viewed on the Department of Public Health website at <http://1.usa.gov/1su9JQb>.